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Placing Lower Value on Senior Lives Stirs Anger

Some U.S. studies use a figure 37% below that for younger people. Key official defends practice.

By Miguel Bustillo
Times Staff Writer

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency came to UCLA on Tuesday to hear from older Americans how it can better protect them from pollution -- and got an earful from an audience alarmed about a White House official who believes the lives of the elderly should count for less when Washington considers certain new health rules.

The "senior listening tour" was part of the EPA's Aging Initiative, a new plan by agency Administrator Christie Whitman to rethink the assumptions used to set environmental regulations now that many older Americans are living longer.

But like similar tour stops around the country, the UCLA event turned into a forum for senior activists and conservationists to criticize the controversial views of John Graham, the Bush White House's regulatory czar, who has given less weight to the lives of elderly than to those of younger folk in some cost-benefit analyses.

Graham's valuations, which place economic values on human life, have already helped to shape several Bush administration actions -- including a study used to form the basis of the hotly disputed Clear Skies initiative to alter air pollution rules, and a new rule on air pollution from snowmobiles. In both studies, the dollar value placed on the lives of older Americans over 70 was 37% less than the figure used for younger adults.

Conservationists have dubbed Graham's valuations the "Senior Death Discount." In Westwood on Tuesday, seniors and environmentalists staged a small protest, with some demonstrators wearing stickers that read "Senior Discount, 37% Off."

"It's unconscionable to relax regulations based on the calculation that seniors' lives are worth 63% as much as the lives of younger people," said Jim Dawson, a 67-year-old Torrance activist with the Gray Panthers who brought his 87-year-old mother, Doris, to the demonstration in her wheelchair. "What

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family do you know that would put a price on the life of a grandparent?"

The White House Office of Management and Budget, where Graham oversees a vast array of federal regulations, contends that environmentalists have distorted a small aspect of the former Harvard professor's complex views on cost-benefit analysis.

Those same views, which are intended to help gauge which regulations would achieve the broadest public benefit while costing the economy the least, also helped to produce a recent EPA air pollution rule on diesel emissions that has been widely praised by environmentalists, OMB officials noted.

The cost-benefit analysis measurement that has attracted controversy is called the "life-years saved" method. It is supposed to assess the value of the years of life potentially saved by health rules, and under Graham, it has contained an "age adjustment" for the elderly in several cases.

But Graham said that in some other cost-benefit calculations, he has placed a higher value on the lives of older people. In fact, OMB officials said, the cost-benefit analysis behind the Clear Skies initiative also included a measurement that assigned a higher value to the years remaining for those over 65, based on the premise that the relatively few years the elderly had left were worth more.

"The life-year promoted by OMB has been widely used in public health and medicine and is routinely used by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to evaluate new drugs and medical therapies," Graham said Tuesday in an e-mail, disputing environmentalists' contentions that the Bush administration is the first to use similar methods when analyzing new regulations.

"OMB and EPA recognize that the life-years of the elderly are precious," Graham said. "In recent rules, a value of \$172,000 has been assigned to each year of life for those under age 65 compared to \$273,000 for each year of life for seniors."

OMB officials said Tuesday that the cost benefit method that gives less weight to the elderly is not currently being contemplated for any future regulations.

Graham, 46, emerged as an expert in the field of cost-benefit analysis while at Harvard, where he became a tenured professor in decision sciences at 32.

His work has long attracted the anger of environmentalists and consumer groups, which contend that his economic approach to judging health and environmental rules devalues human life.

Many such organizations opposed his nomination to the regulatory post, citing the work of his Harvard Center for Risk Analysis, which courted donations from a wide array of corporations subject to health regulations, including tobacco giant Philip Morris.

On Tuesday, senior activists joined the controversy, with some arguing that Bush was courting political trouble by even appearing to discount the lives of seniors.

"We will not forget this, even if it is rescinded," said Genevieve Marcus of the Santa Monica environmental group Experimental Cities. "Seniors' votes will not be discounted 37%."

At the UCLA hearing, EPA officials largely sat and heard suggestions -- and criticism -- without offering a response.

"We hear you loud and clear," Wayne Nastri, the EPA's regional administrator for the West, told the

audience.

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